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TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

FEAR

A Tricycle E-Book

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FACING FEAR

How can we meditate when we're too scared to get on the cushion? Lama Tsony gives us advice on practicing with fear.

Lama Tsony

Lately I've been dealing with a lot of fear during my meditation practice. It seems to come from nowhere, and it either focuses on a specific attachment or it manifests as a more existential, nameless sort of thing. How can I deal with this?

Fear is what happens when reality collides with our personal fiction. Our practice is based on expectations—expectations about who we are, why we are practicing, and what our practice should be. As our hope disintegrates, it may be replaced by fear. Our characteristics, personality, all of our beautiful plans and ideas are like snowflakes about to fall on the hot stone of our meditation practice.

Maybe you've poked through boredom and have had a first taste of spaciousness. Until your experience has become stable, the fear remains that your dreams, your life, and your base could fall apart. The more you contemplate space, the more you are aware of the dissolution of everything you have assumed to be real, lasting, and reliable—including your motivation and your practice. Now it all feels transitory and unreliable. This crisis, rooted in dissolution, translates as fear.

This is a seminal moment in our practice. Each time it manifests, each time we are aware of fear, we have a choice: we can acknowledge our problem and work with it, or we can run away from it and seek refuge elsewhere: distractions, pharmaceuticals, weekend feel-good-about-yourself workshops, whatever. We are free to refuse the disappointment and the dissolution. We don't have to put ourselves back into the situation where the foundation of our being is shaken by the experience of impermanence and emptiness.

But if we decide to continue, if we're convinced of the sanity of the four noble truths and decide to take refuge in the dharma that the Buddha taught, we need to be courageous. We can choose to take refuge in the brilliant sanity of enlightenment, the buddha; trust the process of the path, the dharma; and rely on the experience of those who guide us along the path, the sangha. We can choose to explore our mind, learn about its problem areas and hidden treasures, but it won't be comfortable. The guidance of a spiritual friend or teacher is crucial at this stage of our practice.

At the same time, we can be nice to ourselves, accept ourselves as we are and let go of what we are pretending to be. Our crisis is a normal phase. We all enter the spiritual path as ego-based beings, and as such we have ego-based hopes and fears. Practice is virtually never what we expect. We feel like we've got it all wrong, thinking, "The more I meditate, the worse I become." My teacher, Gendun Rinpoche, always responded to this by saying, "When you see your own shortcomings, it's the dawn of qualities. If you only see your qualities, there's a problem."

It's true that if we continue to try to create our personal nirvana through our practice, we're going to suffer even more. If we use the practice tools that develop intelligence and clarity with a confused, selfish motivation, reality is bound to collide with our fiction. This is where practice is *supposed* to bring us. This is the proof that the dharma works.

It's the end of our confused, fictive world, and the dawning of truth.

When fear arises within our meditation, we apply an antidote. Recognizing what is happening at each instant as mind, we remain in the present. It is important to remember that patterns don't have to repeat themselves. Through remaining in the present, we can let go of the past and the future—the headquarters of our fears. We recognize and then we let go, whether coming back to the focal point of our meditation—posture, breath, visualization—or nonconceptual space. Through motivation, honesty, and confidence you can practice with your fears and go beyond in them in a way you never thought possible.

Lama Tsony was the abbot of Kundreul Ling Monastery in Auvergne, France, for 15 years. In 2007 he adopted the life of a lay dharma teacher in order to devote his time to teaching and meditation. He joined the Bodhi Path community in Virginia in 2009 and currently lives in Virginia as a hermit, posting newsletters and teachings online at tsony.org.

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TRYING TO SPEAK: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF STAGE FRIGHT

David Guy discovers a method for confronting his deepest fears.

David Guy

My first bout of stage fright, the one that inaugurated my real problems, occurred when I was 16 years old and in English class at a boy's private school, beginning to realize I wanted to be a writer. Our English teacher that year was a tall, vaguely handsome British man, a graduate of Cambridge, who had been a shot putter and discus thrower on the British Olympic team. He was popular around school as a soccer and track coach, an inspiring figure in general.

But as an English teacher he was a disaster. Frequently unprepared, he would sit on the edge of his desk in silence for minutes after the class bell rang, wincing at his own cigarette smoke while trying to conjure from the depths of memory whatever work we had read for the day. When this effort failed him, as it often did, his only recourse was to have us read aloud from our weekly compositions. It was an experience that I

dreaded, for good reason. I was just beginning to find my voice, starting to see writing as my life's work. I was experimenting with techniques that were beyond what I could handle. And I was surrounded by classmates who didn't care for writing at all, had the usual adolescent scorn for pretension, were merciless with sarcasm. They were, in other words, 16-year-old boys, and I was desperate to avoid their reckoning. For an entire semester, I had managed to avoid being called upon. And then, on a dismal, rainy afternoon near the end of the semester, motioning to me with a wave of his cigarette, our teacher asked me to begin.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't choke out a single word.

I'd been met by a paralyzing wave of stage fright, larger than I'd ever experienced. My face began to flush. My palms began to sweat. My heart beat with such quickness that I couldn't catch my breath; my chest wouldn't expand. The harder I tried, the more it closed in on me: the panicky feeling fed on itself.

"Are you all right?" our teacher asked. "Are you ill?" The class itself was silent, expectant. Minutes seemed to go by in which the only sound in the room was the scrape of shoes on the wooden floorboards.

"I'm not ill," I finally managed to say. In a halting voice I told him that I could not read my piece aloud; I was too self-conscious.

It was one of the more humiliating moments of my life, and it came at a time when my self-confidence was in short supply. That was the year my father died. And in that year, when I was carrying the knowledge of his illness around like a great weight, nothing seemed to go right. I couldn't make the football team. I couldn't do the work in chemistry or math. I couldn't get a date with the girl I cared for. Now I couldn't speak.

I had lost faith. Not some specifically religious faith, though that was happening, too. I had lost faith in the world as an essentially benign

place where things would work out. They weren't going to work out. My father was going to die.

The poet and social critic Paul Goodman once said that faith is the knowledge that the ground will be there when you take a step. A faithful person strides boldly and purposefully into the world, knowing there is a world for him. When we lose faith, we grow tentative.

We don't believe there is a world for us.

I would guess that in many crises of stage fright—also writer's block, another instance of losing one's voice—some similar deep trauma is behind them, at least the first time. We fail, and then we lose faith, and the most basic activity—speaking—becomes the problem.

After that English class, I took great pains to avoid all occasions of public speaking. Later that year I was nominated for student council president, and I declined because I knew I would have to make a speech. Several years later, in Reynolds Price's writing class at Duke University, I went through agonies when I had to read my stories aloud. And when I finally published a novel, at the age of 32, I was terrified at the thought of reading from it in public. The first offer I got, I turned down.

It was at this point that I took a class in dealing with stage fright. In a room full of equally mortified people, we each stood up, wide-eyed with fear, and gave speeches under our teacher's watchful gaze. I read from my newly published novel.

Our teacher was a superb speaker herself, a drama instructor who had worked with young actors for years. She walked us, step by step, through the physiology of stage fright.

We begin by sensing a fluttery nervousness somewhere, probably down in our belly, and we tighten up so as not to feel it. That tightening is often so automatic that we fail to notice it occurring. It moves up the body until it reaches the diaphragm, which it prevents from expanding.

With our lungs constricted, we physically can't catch our breath. Since oxygen isn't circulating, our heart begins to pound, and a panic reaction sets in: the face and body flush, the hands and feet sweat. Unable to breathe, we tighten more, which in turn induces further panic. All this happens in a matter of seconds.

Confronted with this phenomenon, I would instinctively try to relax. But trying to relax is a contradiction in terms, and it made me shut down even more, sapping my energy. "I'm sure you know, David," the teacher said, "that you stand up to speak and your voice goes to gravel." I knew no such thing—I was too nervous to hear myself—but she had a tape to prove it. She taught me not to calm down, but to take that nervous energy and use it, to belt out my readings. "You'll never get too loud, or exaggerate too much. The more you ham it up, the better."

With her guidance, I learned how to speak loudly and forcefully before an audience. I managed, with some effort, to breathe. But as useful as her instructions were, I still felt terror every time I moved to speak in front of others. The fear—of failure, of public humiliation—remained, and I ran from it instinctively.

It was not until years after my public speaking class, this time in a Buddhist context, that I was finally really able to look at my fear and to understand it, to be with it. Buddhism, which expresses much faith in experiencing what is happening, taught me that the way to change your karma is not to respond—run when you're afraid, hit someone when you're angry—but to feel the feeling without responding. Then it is not passed on. It does no harm.

It is that experience of deep feeling that teaches us about stage fright and, more generally, about fear.

When my wife and I returned to North Carolina nine years ago from a stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we had both studied

Vipassana meditation, I knew I wanted to find a place to practice. After about a year, I saw an advertisement in our local weekly for a Zen center in Chapel Hill. I was hesitant, at first, about practicing in a new tradition, but my concerns were quickly allayed. Of all the forms of Buddhism, Soto Zen is probably the closest to Vipassana. There are surface differences: in Zen we sit facing the wall, keep our eyes open slightly, hold our hands in a mudra. There is somewhat more of an emphasis on the body in Zen, more concern with correct posture. But our basic practice, like that of Vipassana, is to keep letting go of thoughts and to come back to bodily feelings.

At the Zen center there is a brief service of bowing and chanting at the end of sittings. This seemed strange at first: I had never done a floor bow before, nor much chanting. But I came to appreciate the bows as expressing a devotion I already felt, and saw the chanting as a physical practice like walking meditation.

At every service, a person called the *kokyo* announces the name of each chant and, following the group recitation, sings elaborate dedications. After I had sat faithfully for several years at the Zen center, Taitaku Pat Phelan, the resident teacher, approached me and asked if I might like to try being the kokyo. In theory, I did—I had come to love the chants—but I was wary.

For one thing, being kokyo is very much a performance—many of the kokyos had beautiful voices. For another, when the time comes to perform, you have to do it without hesitation. There is a clunk on the bell, and you sing. When I would give a talk or reading, if I was hit by a wave of stage fright, I paused. There was no pausing for the kokyo.

I was terrible the first few times. I had strong attacks of stage fright, couldn't get my breath. My voice cracked and wobbled. I had never shown myself up that way in front of this group. In any other context the

solution would have been to find a replacement. But the world of Zen is often ass-backward. You see a problem and wade right into it. "If this is deeply humiliating," Pat said, "if it really makes you feel miserable, you shouldn't do it."

I didn't feel that bad. I was, after all, surrounded by friends.

"Then this is an ideal situation for practicing with your problem. You can see it clearly. Don't try to change the feeling. Just observe it. See it as something interesting."

She was right. In the crucible of my stage fright, I was afforded a superb opportunity to look at fear. These were laboratory conditions. While stage fright certainly doesn't seem small when it comes up, it is nonetheless a limited fear, and a predictable one. You can observe it without being overwhelmed by it.

I learned some things about fear in this situation I never could have otherwise. They have become my guidelines for dealing with it.

Feel fear when it arises, not when you would like it to arise. I was sitting two periods of zazen just before I had to perform. My tendency in that situation was to think those periods were for my practice. I didn't want to waste time worrying about performing.

But we have no control over what comes up in our body and mind, and no "subject" for zazen is better than any other. To brush something aside because it arises at an inconvenient moment is to not value our life as it unfolds. And from a practical standpoint, fear will come up until it is heard. It will grow as strong as it needs to. If it is an hour before the occasion and fear comes up—or two hours, two days—feel it then. Feel it any chance you get.

The obsessive thinking that accompanies fear is useless. On occasions when I was kokyo, the thoughts were especially absurd: Drop the chant book and run from the room. Hand the book to the woman beside me and ask her to do it. Walk up to the priest—in the middle of service—and tell her I can't go on. That kind of thinking never ends. It is an expression of fear, and its purpose is to distract you from the anxiety of the situation. But the only way to deal with fear is to allow yourself to feel it, to experience it in all of its discomfort. There is no other solurion.

Fear is most workable in its physical manifestation. There may, indeed, be a meditation master who is so adept at watching his mind that he can observe even the rapid-fire thinking that takes place during fear, bur I am certainly not that person, and most meditators I know find it difficult to watch the mind at all. The best advice in this situation is that of Zen in general: Let go of thoughts and bring your attention back to bodily sensations. As many times as you get caught in thought, come back to the body. That is the practice.

Fear demands to be felt, and it can be felt most readily in the body, as a powerful sensation. The. experience may be uncomfortable, but as you watch fear manifest in the body, the truth of the Buddha's words is revealed: It does arise because of conditions. It is not a wall of emotion, but a constantly changing process. And it finally ends. It has its say and departs.

In time, sitting and watching fear, we see its true emptiness. There are various sensations in the body, some strong, some weak, some painful, some pleasurable. Thoughts also come and go. We take a segment of that experience and call it "fear." But we're the ones who label it. We create "fear." In the body and mind it is just more thoughts and feelings.

The more deeply you can feel fear, the easier it will be to handle. The words that Zen teacher Ed Brown once spoke at a sesshin, a seven-day practice period, still ring true to me: We feel anger up in the chest, sadness in the mid-abdomen, and fear in the deep abdomen. Fear is the deepest feeling in the body and the most basic human feeling. To feel into fear is to look deeply into ourselves.

The sensations of stage fright—the pressure at the diaphragm, for instance—are actually a tightening so as not to feel fear. This tightening begins at the sphincter ("tight-assed" is not just an expression) and proceeds up the torso until, so to speak, it has us by the throat. It can tighten the whole body. It moves very quickly.

The earlier, and further down, you catch this process, the better. If you can feel that tightness at the diaphragm—with full awareness, without trying to change it or put an end to it—it isn't as disabling. If you can feel the tightness at the sphincter, it won't move up into the torso. And if you can feel the sensation of fear before there is any tightening at all, you will see that it exists as a ball of energy in the pit of the stomach. It might be uncomfortable, but if you can stay with it, you will see it for what it is: just energy. The moment you become aware of it, it is your energy. You can use it.

We can never get cocky with fear. As soon as we have it licked, a wave comes along that shows us who is boss. I might go for days at the zendo with no stage fright at all. Then suddenly I'm like that 16-year-old kid in English class.

Nevertheless, *the experience of learning to meet fear builds upon itself.* It is a skill, and the more we do it, the better we get. Seeing its true symptoms, its beginning as physical energy, takes away some of its mystique. We see not necessarily that we can handle it all the time, but that it is a phenomenon of life, like any other.

So fear is not defeated, but doesn't have to be defeating. We are never finished with it—nevertheless, we don't have to dread its return. Being free of fear is not a matter of never feeling it, but of not being flattened when we do. We can feel it and know it is a natural phenomenon, also an impermanent one, which will have its say and be gone.

David Guy is the writing instructor for the Service Opportunities in Leadership and the Hart Fellows programs at Duke University. His most recent books include *Jake Fades: A Novel of Impermanence* and, with Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Art of Insight Meditation*.

3

THE PRICE OF FEAR

In the face of vanishing freedom, Joel Agee finds inspiration in the story of Siddhartha Gautama.

Joel Agee

I told a friend I would be writing an essay about fear. He cautioned me, counseled me: "Don't say that our fears are groundless." He had heard me express the widespread opinion that in allowing ourselves to be governed by fear, we may be forfeiting our freedom.

Of course our fears are not groundless. Who would deny the threat of nuclear and biological war on our shores? And there are militant factions within three major religions that seem intent on fulfilling some prophecy of a final war between good and evil, certain that they and not their enemies are the children of light. What greater danger can be imagined?

But just for that reason it seems to me necessary to live without fear—to the extent that we are able, of course. This does not mean we should not protect ourselves from real dangers. It means we must be vigilant against the counsels of fear.

What impressed me most forcefully in the pictures from Abu Ghraib was how fear was employed as an instrument of torture. Humiliation too—but those photographs were meant to terrify, because they could be used to shame the victims in their communities.

Why has the discussion of these outrages very nearly vanished from public discourse? Does our silence bespeak a tacit consent to their possible continuation? If so, what would be our motive? I believe it is fear—fear of an elusive, treacherous enemy, but also fear of seeing the depths to which we may go for the sake of an equally elusive security.

I spent my formative years behind the Iron Curtain. It is commonplace to say the people there were deprived of their freedom. This is true, but it is a truth that was not evident to many of those people. If you live in a stooped position long enough you can come to mistake it for an upright stance.

I remember crossing the East German border after I had lived in the West for a while. There was an obvious external difference—more color on one side, more traffic, more flowers.

But the inner difference was less easy to identify. I called it freedom, as most people did. But remembering it now, I think that fear and the lack of it describe it better. There is no freedom without freedom from fear.

Of all the stories in the world's religions, the one that inspires me most is the story of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, sitting under the Bodhi tree, at the end of a path of austerity and fruitless searching.

A shepherd girl brings him a bowl of rice milk to restore his emaciated body, and he resolves not to rise until he attains enlightenment. Mara, the Lord of Illusion, unleashes his armies—every conceivable terror, every death, every torment the mind can imagine. "O Mara, you cannot imprison me again," Siddhartha says. "The rafters are broken, the ridgepole is sundered. I have seen the builder of the house."

To us who live daily with some measure of fear, this example may seem too grand and too noble for practical emulation. But Siddhartha was a man, not a god, and what he did can be accomplished by

ordinary people.

I have had much acquaintance with fear, and some with danger as well. There is a difference. This difference may be too obvious to mention, but it is frequently overlooked.

Fear is a product of the mind. And danger can be met without fear. Surely soldiers in battle know about this. There is no greater enemy than fear.

Abridged from an essay that originally appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in December 2004. Joel Agee's most recent book is *In the House of My Fear*, a spiritual autobiography.

4

AS THE CLOUDS VANISH

Tsoknyi Rinpoche speaks on Dzogchen, called the Great Perfection in Tibetan dharma.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a son of the late Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, was born in Nepal in 1966. At the age of 8 he was recognized by the 16th Karmapa as an incarnation of the accomplished yogi Drubwang Tsoknyi and has been trained in both the Drugpa Kagyu and Nyingma lineages. He lived at Khampargar Monastery in Tashi Jong, near Dharamsala, India, until his early twenties, when he returned to Nepal to take up residence at Ngedon Osel Ling Monastery in the Kathmandu Valley, a new monastery established by his father. Tsoknyi Rinpoche has led many retreats and made numerous teaching tours in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. His writings include the books Carefree Dignity*;* Fearless Simplicity*; and* Open Heart, Open Mind. *The following interview was held in 1998 in Connecticut, where Tsoknyi Rinpoche was leading a retreat. Questions were asked by Josh Baran, Amy Gross, Sharon Salzberg, and Helen Tworkov. Answers were translated by Erik Pema Kunsang.*

There are now many Buddhist teachers who are introducing Dzogchen in the West, and you have expressed some concern about this. These instructions are arriving in the West, but the ground of the Great Perfection is not arriving—it's already here, present as the nature of mind of any sentient being. The methods are arriving in the West. The methods

by which this ground can be realized—the ground of the Great Perfection. Yet what do we have here in the West? Do we have a king, a community, or some kind of council to verify exactly who has the authentic transmission, who is a realized master? And what is the quality, the very fiber of the instructions being brought to the West right now? Do they live up to the highest standards? Buddha taught that when you buy gold, you should check it carefully, and that in the same way you should check his teachings carefully to see whether or not they are authentic. It's your responsibility. When the teachings were imported, so to speak, from India to Tibet, a king at that time took upon himself the responsibility of finding the most authentic, the most pure, the most genuine teachings on ground, path, and fruition. But we haven't yet gotten to the point at which such authenticity is fully clarified, so therefore there is a certain risk.

What is actually risked? First of all, the message of Buddhism is to state the facts, to simply tell it as it is. To say what is the nature of things, to reveal what is true. That's what a buddha does. But in particular, the teachings of the Great Perfection—Dzogchen—is a method of stating very clearly the basic state, the natural state of all things. So therefore it happens that people then think, "Well, if that's the case, if it's a matter of just facing one's nature and being natural, then what is the use of all this kind of stuff the Tibetans are doing: bowing down, making rituals, walking around things, saying mantras, doing different preliminary practices, all that kind of stuff. That's not natural! I should just be as I am. Live as I am, and just do whatever comes naturally. That is the Great Perfection." In this kind of distorted understanding runs a great danger. Because the preliminary practices and all the methods are not "Tibetan" inventions, it's not "Tibetan" culture. They are methods that embody

the teachings. Of course there are aspects of spiritual practice that are specific to Tibetan culture. But also there are ways of practicing that are specifically Buddhist, and when people take it upon themselves to decide which is which, then the distortion comes in. The outcome of that is an incomplete dharma path. So therefore it is my opinion that as the teachings arrive in the West, we need the complete toolbox, so to speak.

In terms of the whole toolbox: there are many Vipassana students at this retreat, and the teachings that you presented are not the whole toolbox, but they are incredibly helpful. Is this a problem? Let's say that a person has already undergone many years of training in the Zen or Vipassana tradition and has laid a solid foundation of practice that way. And because of that, one is open and very interested in proceeding with the Dzogchen teachings and feels very inspired by those instructions. At that point one can simply apply the instructions and hold an openness for the additional practices that come together with the Dzogchen teachings. That's one way. On the other hand, another could be that one narrows one's approach and says, "What I like about this, that is the real teaching. All the other is just Tibetan artificial stuff." And one sort of "de-selects" all the practices that one doesn't really feel are comfortable for oneself. This comes from the American emphasis on individual freedom, where one can pick and choose whatever one likes. So if that kind of pattern is applied to the teachings, that is one of the dangers.

How would you describe the teachings that you've presented in this retreat? My approach is first to communicate what is called the ground, the buddhanature, and then, when explaining what is called the path stage, its juice—the view—I try to bring the individual practitioner face to face with what is called the view of their own nature of mind. Once

that has happened, there's some kind of insight that takes place in personal experience. That is what needs to be developed and deepened. So how to go about that? Only by focusing on that and nothing else? Or to use other methods, such as taking refuge, developing *bodhicitta*—the resolve to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings—accumulating merit, and so forth. These other practices deepen compassion and other important qualities. I feel that if one combines the insight into the nature of mind together with these other practices, they help you to progress much faster. A lot of people I meet have practiced Vipassana or Zen for 20 or more years, and when they come into contact with the Dzogchen teachings, their practice and the Dzogchen teachings are mutually benefiting. The Vipassana system is a very sound, steady way of progressing, and there's a model of slowly reaching some level of perfection. Conceptual habits begin to dissolve because of the training. The subject-object, conceptual attitude wears out, wears down, and fades away. But let's say that if, two-thirds of the way on that path, that person came into contact with the Dzogchen teachings, then maybe just within the next year the same progress could be made that may otherwise have taken ten more years.

Can this be further explained by an example from meditation practice? At the outset of the Vipassana path, one is told to try to be deliberately mindful, and so one proceeds that way. Then through the training of trying to be mindful one becomes more aware, but to such an extent that it expands further and further, encompassing all situations and all moments, and finally to such an extent that trying to be more mindful and being mindful becomes one identity of just awareness. At this point there is no longer someone being aware of something. That is what is meant by the dissolving of the conceptual attitude. In Dzogchen train-

ing one is taught how to recognize that the nature of awareness is kind of baseless, insubstantial, and just to be that from the very beginning. So therefore if someone has already gone through a lot of preparation of Vipassana training and has, you can say, accumulated a huge amount of stability or of *samadhi*, when such a person is introduced in the correct way to how to recognize the nature of awareness, then this instruction and the prior training can combine, and realization can take place very fast. The Dzogchen teachings and buddhadharma in general are guaranteed authentic. But when they are applied by the individual person, there's never any guarantee. We have to distinguish between the dharma as a teaching and the dharma as it is applied by a practitioner.

Can any Dzogchen practices be done before meeting a teacher? Can instructions be obtained from books? Like do-it-yourself Dzogchen? To fully absorb the intent of what is being said, even intellectually, one probably needs to read a book three or four times. And even then one does not get the authentic experience of Dzogchen. To transmit the Dzogchen teachings, a proper environment needs to be arranged. An authentic teacher needs to be present, and those who come to receive the teachings need to have some sincerity and openness. Somebody just gathering answers will wonder, "Where does this belong? What country is it in? Does it come from the sky? Does it grow up from below?" That's another danger that comes with the time we live in, because of getting things piecemeal. Pieces, fragments of teachings. "It's very interesting, I like that, but where does it fit? I don't know." For the transmission of Dzogchen, you definitely need an authentic master.

Yet there are wonderful books out there, including your own (*Carefree Dignity*). How do you define their value? One can get "a mental

image." We shouldn't frown upon the importance of having a mental image of the awakened state. It is very useful for piloting ourselves in the right direction. Let's say that there's something to appreciate in that kind of attitude. First of all, a person has already understood that ordinary attitudes are painful and feels there must be some way out of that. Trying to find a way but not really knowing how, also not really knowing what is the main cause of the problems, which is traditionally called understanding the truth of suffering but not the origin of suffering, and not the true path either. But one is still trying, and trying has to get some points, even though it hasn't gotten very far. Still, there is sincerity, and the lack of understanding really can't be held against people. Nevertheless, thinking about enlightenment is not the true path. Even when one is on the path, retaining the idea keeps you in the conceptual realm. You haven't released the concept of enlightenment. You're still holding on to that as the object of attainment, conceptually. You can't help that. In the West, philosophy, I'm sorry to say, is conceptual. And there is not much philosophy that is beyond conceptual attitude. So who can blame anybody for that?

What if you discover that your motivation was based on that kind of grasping, of holding onto a lofty ideal of enlightenment? Change it. You need to change your mind. If you don't know how to change your attitude or motivation, you need to seek help from somebody who does know. Isn't this obvious?

I was thinking more about people feeling ashamed of how they've approached their practice. Honestly, there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. What one really should have been ashamed of is to have the attitude that "I am real. Everything is real. Everything is permanent. There

is nothing beyond what I just experienced with my normal senses. There is no spiritual path for us to pursue." Any person who holds on to that for dear life should be ashamed.

Rinpoche, we often hear that we need to let go of, or dissolve, hope and fear. In the West we know that fear is a negative thing. Everyone wants to get rid of fear. But hope is often seen in a very positive light. People hope for the future, hope for enlightenment, hope for a good life. What is the problem with hope? To make it very simple, distinguish between the meditation state of composure and the postmeditation state. I am not saying that we should not entertain any hope during postmeditation. It is only during the meditation state of composure itself that we don't entertain hope. Actually, I have the attitude that fear is more intelligent than hope—more justified. Fear is like a spur. Fear makes you get somewhere. Otherwise, if you had no fear of suffering, you wouldn't bother to find out why it happened in the first place, and also how to be free. What would be the right path? Fear makes us seek a path. It makes us want to learn how to progress. If we didn't have any fear at all, we would be, what do you call it, a real loser.

Sometimes we can be so afraid of ourselves that our meditation becomes paralyzed. There are different ways of being afraid: Pointlessly afraid, and justifiably afraid. Being afraid of thoughts and emotions belongs under "pointlessly afraid." But there is also a necessary way of being afraid. And that is the more intelligent kind, which is that you face facts and you understand that if such and such negative action makes such and such happen, then it's not going to go well, and you're afraid of that, so you do your best. That's an intelligent kind of fear. But being pointlessly afraid of oneself, afraid of one's thoughts, afraid of one's

emotions—that comes from not knowing how to be free. One is afraid of facing oneself, of even using a method to do so. Also afraid that even if I were to practice meditation, I would kind of ruin it.

What about the fear of letting go, the fear of annihilating your ego, which feels like dying? That's ego's trick. It's ego's smoke screen, whispering that by letting go of ego you will be in deep trouble. Making a smoke screen that one then believes. Ego's trick. That's why it's so important to let go of all concerns. "If it goes well or doesn't go well, I don't care. If I have good results from this meditation practice or if it gets painful or pleasant, I don't care, I'll just continue to practice." That's very useful. But when facing the letting go of ego, ego will immediately say, "If you let go of ego you'll be in big trouble." If one accepts that as being true, then one is fooled by ego. You don't have to be afraid of being incapable of functioning in this world after releasing ego. Trust me on this one; don't trust ego on this one!

Most Westerners use "ego" in a different sense. Can you help clarify this? From the Buddhist point of view, ego means not leaving the mind alone with just the quality of knowing or of being aware. In addition, there's a claiming of ownership of this conscious quality, something that is extra to just experiencing. Rather than just leaving well enough alone in any moment of experiencing, just letting whatever is in that experience be as it naturally is, there's a sense of separating from that, looking at it from the outside by jumping out of the window of the room, and then looking back and forming the notion "That is my room." That kind of possessive attitude is what is called ego.

Is it useful to get a taste of one's ego—in terms of discursive or dual-

istic mind—through meditation, so that the teachings on the nature of that mind become more accessible? Definitely. The beginning point of meditation is to relax one's attention and be more open, and to try to be with that. This is not necessarily the same as Dzogchen. But still it is necessary in order to become more aware of what kinds of thoughts and emotions frequent this area, so to speak. This is where the value of insight meditation—like what Sharon [Salzberg]—is teaching comes in, because you come to notice exactly what is happening and what is wrong with this state of mind, which one usually perpetuates. That doesn't mean being free of it, but it means coming to know it. And then later one can apply the instructions of how to liberate that state of mind. That is why mindfulness is something very precious. But just being mindful isn't enough—"Now there's attachment, now there's anger, now there's a thought, now there's no thought, and now I feel selfish, and now that is gone." Simply knowing oneself in that way, some people feel, is the ultimate aim, to just be aware of whatever happens, mindfully in every moment, so that there is a continual awareness of what takes place. But as far as I'm concerned, that is not very profound. In addition to being aware of what takes place, there is something more, and that is knowing how to be free. To be free in the very moment an emotion occurs, and also to be free in a way in which the thought or emotion dissolves by itself. We need to learn that as well. This doesn't mean waiting until it vanishes through impermanence, since an emotion or thought doesn't hang out in one's mind for eternity. That is why being immediately free is something extremely important. Free upon arising.

Upon arising? Of a thought. That as a thought arises, or emotion is formed, it is freed as it arises. The main point is the knowing how to be free.

And the self-clinging that you have been talking about in the teachings, does that come from adding that sense of possession? That is the clinging mind. Before that, there was a feeling of "I am separate from that." This is called the personal identity. And then after that, "that belongs to me." But it is possible to simply let what is be in a very natural way without having to separate out some extra entity that then owns the experience. There is a tendency in the West to misunderstand the varied connotations of no-ego, of egolessness, as being no-knowing. It is like equating experience with ego and when one hears "no ego," then therefore there must be no experience, no knowing quality either. That's a misunderstanding. It is possible to know without ego—without owning the experience.

"Who" knows? The cognizant quality. The "who" is added, as if something extra is needed in order to know. The traditional example is of a flame that illuminates a candle by itself. It does not require an extra agent, like "Please bring in a torch, otherwise we cannot see that there is a candle flame burning." It's not like that. This notion of self-knowing or automatic knowing may be a little foreign in the Western culture. It seems as if ego is always required in order for knowing to be. If there were an owner in any moment of experience, then there would be a real ego. But in reality nothing is really owned. Ego thinks it is very smart, but actually ego is deluded by confusion. Poor ego: It just believes. It tries to be very smart, believing that this is how it really is. But it isn't. It's just a delusion. It's not really true.

Without a knower, the thought is empty of conceptual content or attributes, and therefore there is nothing to cling to? Simply put, all phenomena are free of conceptual attributes, free of that notion as well. How

can you say that emptiness is this absence? Can't even say that either. Because then it wouldn't be true emptiness, it would just be a statement of absence. Of course there could be an understanding or emptiness as an idea, but not emptiness as an actuality. And yet emptiness as an idea can do away with all other concepts. But the concept of emptiness itself can have such a tight hold on the mind that you might think, "I cannot challenge emptiness." But eventually this conceptual attitude grows very tired. Then it thinks, "I can't keep this job any more. Can I be excused?" Then conceptual attitude releases its grip. That itself leaves room for emptiness, right there.

There are different approaches in Buddhist traditions. One is to inquire and inquire and inquire until conceptual attitude gives up. There's a famous quote "As long as conceptual involvement does not cease, there's no end to the vehicles of teachings." In other words, there is still the process, not the arriving. As long as you're trying to get it, there is no experience of emptiness in actuality. During meditation practice the concept of emptiness has to be let go of.

Another point is that just as it is possible to misunderstand the purpose and training of insight meditation, it is equally possible to misconstrue what is meant by Dzogchen practice. For example, the attitude "There is nothing to do at all, I'll just carry on in my usual way, just being natural" That could lead straight into a training in stupidity meditation: "I don't cling to anything. There's nothing to do, to meditate on, just relax, let myself be. That is Dzogchen!" That's a huge mistake. Maybe if someone trains like that for a long time, it can form the cause for being reborn as an imbecile. That's why it is important for people to connect with true teachers and then experience what is true. And that is my wish.

The following articles were taken from a special section on working with fear after the September 11 terrorist attacks in Tricycle*'s Spring 2002 issue. —Ed.*

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INVITING FEAR

Amaro Bhikkhu guides us through a meditation on fear and teaches us to tame it with attention.

Ajahn Amaro

Above all, a materialistic society desires certainty—it seeks to guarantee it; passes laws to enforce it; wipes our the pathogens that threaten it; and lets everyone have guns to protect it. Even the seemingly innocuous habits of inking in plans and clinging to beliefs and opinions are the reverse-image of the uncertainties that the heart yearns to be certain about.

Yet if we seek security in that which is inherently uncertain, dukkha, or discontent, is the inevitable result.

Fear is a discomfiting friend. The impulse is to get to a place of safety, but where in the phenomenal world—either mental or physical—could that be? The insight of the Buddha, informed by his own experiences of exploring fear and dread, encourages us to make a 180-degree turn. Whereas the instinct is to shrink away from the threatening aspects of life, his injunction for those who wish to free the heart is to contemplate frequently the following:

I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging;
I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness;
I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying;

All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become
otherwise, will become separated from me.
For that which is threatening to the ego is liberating for the heart.

By turning to face the inarguable facts of nature, the habit of investing in unstable realms is interrupted. It shines the light of wisdom on the issue, reveals that we've been looking for certainty in the wrong place, and thus frees up the attention to realize where security can be found.

This needs to be examined in the light of personal experience, but in traditional Buddhist terminology, such security is said to be found in the Triple Gem: the buddha—the awakened, knowing faculty of the heart; the dharma—the truth of the way things are; and the sangha—the noble, unselfish response. For when the awakened heart knows the way things truly are, what springs forth is harmonious and virtuous action. Undiscriminating awareness is dependable. The reality of nature is dependable. Harmony is possible.

How can we arrive at such security?

There are many ways to meditate on fear. One is to wait until it appears adventitiously. Another is to invite it in—when we send out invitations we can be a little better prepared for who shows up at the party.

Perhaps for both methods of approach the first thing to bear in mind is that fear is not the enemy—it is nature's protector; it only becomes troublesome when it oversteps its bounds. In order to deal with fear we must take a fundamentally noncontentious attitude toward it, so it's held not as "My big fear problem" but rather "Here is fear that has come to visit." Once we take this attitude, we can begin to work with fear.

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Begin by sitting quietly and focusing the attention as clearly as possible on the present moment, using a simple tranquil object to establish

equilibrium—the natural rhythm of the breath is good for this purpose for most people, moving in the empty space of the heart .

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Once such centeredness has been established, deliberately bring to mind something that will arouse a fear reaction. For example,

"Anthrax in the mail"
"Nuclear war"
"Suicide bombers"

—or any other memory, imagined possibility, or image that triggers the compulsive effect.

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Once the seed crystal has been dropped into the mental pool and the consequent flow of thoughts and images has begun, make a definite and concerted effort to withdraw the attention from the stories the thoughts are telling. Bring it instead into the sensations of the physical body.

Where do I feel the fear? What is its texture?

Is it hot or cold?

Is it painful? Rigid? Elastic?

We are not necessarily looking for verbal answers to all these questions; rather, we are just trying to find the feeling, accept it completely, and not add anything to it.

"Fear feels like this."

Many find that fear locates itself primarily in the solar plexus, sitting like a tightened knot in the belly. Just feel it, know it, open the heart to it as much as possible. We're not trying to pretend or force ourselves to like it, but it is here—right now it's the way things are.

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Let this process run for at least ten minutes, then consciously let it wind down—not suppressing it, but, as when it's time for guests to leave, make the hints, and let the event wind down naturally. It might take a while, but that's fine; just let it run out at its own pace. During this time, reestablish the breath as a focal point, and use the exhalation to support the fading of the fear-wave.

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Once it has come to an end, focus the attention on the feeling of the breath, moving as before in the empty space of the heart. Let the heart be clearly conscious that the fear cycle has come to cessation: it arose out of emptiness, returned to emptiness. It was florid and impactful in its appearance, but the overarching quality, now having been seen directly, is its transiency.

Now we know . . .

The effect of this practice is to train the heart, so that when the next wave of fear arises, from whatever quarter, something in us knows. The intuitive wisdom faculty is awakened and recognizes: "I know this scenario—don't panic—it looks impressive, but it's just the fear reaction." It becomes vastly easier to avoid being sucked into the vortex of anxiety.

The feeling is not pleasant, but the heart knows, with absolute certainty: "It's only a feeling." And if action needs to be taken, then that action will be motivated by wisdom, kindness, and sensitivity to time and place rather than by neurotic reactivity and habit.

Ajahn Amaro is abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in southeast England. He has been a monk for 35 years.

6

IT'S ONLY NATURAL

Wes Nisker learns the wisdom of fear.

Wes Nisker

Fear is perfectly natural, with its roots lying deep in the survival instinct. All living beings, from the simplest amoeba to some of the most realized beings on the planet, will have some form of aversive reaction to external threats.

Some years ago, I just happened to be on the same 18-seat plane as the Dalai Lama, flying from Dharamsala to New Delhi, a route where the updrafts from the Himalayan foothills can be vicious. In his autobiography, His Holiness talks about his fear of flying, and every time I glanced back at him on this particular flight he was visibly anxious, staring intently out of the window while fingering his mala and silently reciting a mantra. Just the fact that the Dalai Lama was on the plane made me feel safer, but seeing his nervousness was also somehow comforting, making my own fear of flying seem less personal.

Becoming more comfortable with fear begins with our acknowledgment that these strong sensations we feel are a biologically programmed reaction to some perceived threat. The Buddha called all such organic reactions "underlying tendencies" and said that the way to work with them is to realize "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not my self." If we understand fear as an evolved survival mechanism, we gain some perspective and perhaps some release from our identification with the

feeling. We might even arrive at a place where we can bow down to fear, seeing it as a friend who is looking our for our very life. Bur a caveat here: Becoming too comfortable with your fear could be hazardous to your health. If the wolf is at the door, it is wise to listen to your fear and refuse to open up.

When feelings of fear, sadness, or anger arise in me, as they began to do regularly since September 11, my practice is to bring awareness to the sensations in my body and say to myself what has become almost a mantra for me, "It's perfectly natural." Another phrase that I use is "I'm only human." (Some people think the phrases work better as "It's only natural," and "I'm perfectly human.") Often the physical sensations will remain, or they may begin to move and change, but whatever they do, my sense of self is no longer so tightly contracted around them. Recognizing that difficult emotions are common to all humans also seems to arouse immediate feelings of empathy with others. We share our emotions: they are part of our collective karma, the human condition.

For some time after the terrorist attacks and the start of the Iraq war, I also found myself thinking of the Buddha's admonition to reflect on our own death, and the fact that we can't know when or how it will happen. "Of all mindfulness meditations," said the Buddha, "that on death is supreme." The visual images of the attacks and then the war have become tools of that reflection for me, like tantric paintings or the skeletons in Thai teaching pictures. If we are to live with wisdom, then we must live with the specter of death, which was raised for all of us on 9/11 and thereafter.

Wes Nisker is the author of two bestselling books, *Buddha's Nature* and *Crazy Wisdom*, and the founder and co-editor of the Buddhist journal *Inquiring Mind*.

7

TAKING FEAR APART

Ken McLeod disassembles the components of fear.

Ken McLeod

On Sept. 11, 2001, I watched in shock as the great cathedrals of globalism, the World Trade Center towers, crumbled into dust. The tallest and grandest buildings of any culture represent beliefs in invincibility, entitlement, and power. When these illusions are shattered, fear arises. Events such as 9/11 and the anthrax mailings reveal that all of us are vulnerable to injury, ruin, and death. Such threats can materialize at any time, from anywhere, inside or outside our own culture. When concerns about survival, safety, or identity resonate strongly with basic fears, we experience terror. It is not a comfortable experience.

Fear is a reactive mechanism that operates when our identity (including the identity of being a physical entity) is threatened. It works to erode or dissipate attention. We move into one of the six realms and react: destroy the threat or seek revenge (hell being); grasp at safety and security (hungry ghost); focus on survival (animal); pursue pleasure as compensation (human); vie for superiority (titan); or protect status and position (god). Because we are less present to what is actually taking place, our actions are correspondingly less appropriate and less effective. We go to sleep in our beliefs and ignore the consequences of maintaining them.

How do we experience fear or terror without crumbling into reaction and the six realms? Sit with attention in the experience of fear, and you become aware of the feeling itself and how it resonates with other areas of life. You become aware of older, uncomfortable, buried feelings. You understand and know directly the structure that formed in you to keep you from being present in your life. The task is to take the structure apart, dismantle the projections, and know fear directly as it is, a movement of emotional energy:

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First, identify a reactive behavior and repeatedly ask, "Why am I doing this?" Cut through the layers of projection or suppression until you arrive at "I don't know." Right there you will be experiencing an emotion. Ordinarily, we do not experience feelings directly, because we either act on them and the energy goes into the action, or we suppress them and the energy goes into the body.

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Stop doing the reactive activity. The feeling will be right there. Enter into it and be the feeling. Being the feeling is different from being with the feeling. A feeling is like a ball of multicolored yarn, with all kinds of secondary reactions that may conflict with each other. Open to the different shades and hues as fully as possible. What emerges is a distinct and identifiable feeling. Be the feeling as fully as possible, yet rest in attention.

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At least twice a day, sit and evoke the feeling you have identified. Bring it up and be it. It will release. When it does, evoke it again. Keep entering the feeling by evoking it until you can stay in it. Your relationship with the feeling will change.

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When you can evoke the feeling at will, begin this work in your daily life. Recognize the feeling when it arises during the day and be it. Remember the feeling or evoke it. Then engage your regular activities while you are the feeling. Look at the world while you live in the feeling. In this step, you see clearly that the way the feeling causes you to experience the world is purely projection.

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Finally, whenever you can, look at what is experiencing being the feeling. This step usually precipitates clarity and nonseparation experiences. Work at this until you can be the feeling and look at what it is simultaneously.

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When you can be the feeling and know its nature simultaneously, the feeling no longer has any power over you. You are free from its projections and experience what arises just as it is. You no longer believe what the feeling says about the world, so the impulse to go to war, to fight, to grasp at security, or to protect status, dissipates. Because you see clearly, you are more likely to notice what is out of balance. And you understand the connections between imbalances and suffering in the world.

Buddhist practice is not an effort to confirm or validate a sense of what we are. It is about seeing and experiencing what is. We let go of fixed positions as we understand that all experience is ineffable. We let go of hope and aspirations as we understand that eternal bliss is not an option. We let go of trying to make the world or ourselves into something solid as we understand that all experience arises and subsides. Instead of reacting to fear and terror with hatred, discrimination, or confusion, we live in awareness, not looking to the past or the future for meaning or motivation, but responding pre-

cisely and appropriately to imbalance and the needs of the present.

Ken McLeod, the director of Unfettered Mind, a Buddhist teaching and counseling service, is the author of several books, including *Wake Up to Your Life: Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention* and *An Arrow to the Heart: A Commentary on the Heart Sutra*.

8

BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAINS

Reflections by the late John Daido Loori Roshi on the difficult path between fear of living and fear of dying

John Daido Loori Roshi

For all the horror and trauma that terrorism creates, its lasting power resides in the largely irrational fear we create and then magnify with our minds. Today, statistics show that airplanes are twenty-two times safer than automobiles, yet many people have stopped flying because of the fear that the September 11 attacks engendered. The anthrax scare has caused a widespread reluctance to handle mail, yet only five deaths have resulted from anthrax letters among 30 billion pieces delivered nationwide. We are afraid of death by biological attacks, yet in America some 20,000 people die of the flu each year, and only half of those most at risk get vaccinated. Clearly, the fear of terrorism will not be appeased by providing information, rationalizations, or statistics. It resides in a deep aspect of our consciousness. In order to work with it, we need to understand how it develops.

The force of the recent events has created a series of reactions that many of us are going through. The first is a numbness precipitated by the trauma to our bodies and minds. At this stage, all we can do is sit

with the numbness until we're ready to open up and let our feelings arise. When they do, we need to allow them to come up and not suppress them. Because these feelings will be powerful, we may be able to deal with them only briefly. That's okay. We then need to consciously let them go and return to the center of our being, to our still point. After some time, we can begin to work with our feelings again. Depending on the intensity of the trauma, we may need to repeat this process over months or even years.

Some people may have to deal with anger. When we're overwhelmed, an alternative to going numb is to become angry. We set up a target to deflect our feelings away from ourselves, thus avoiding any responsibility for them. Yet, like fear, we create anger by a series of thoughts that result in a particular emotional and physiological state. Anger doesn't just happen to us. If we're able to catch an angry thought as it's budding, we can let it go. The same is true of despair or hopelessness. And when letting go is too difficult, a good medicine for dealing with these emotions is to reach our and help others, healing them and ourselves.

This is not an easy process to go through. The strength to engage it arises out of our meditation practice, our vows to awaken, our commitment to wisdom and compassion, and our spiritual fearlessness.

The fearlessness of the great spiritual teachers like Moses, Jesus, Saint Theresa, Buddha, and Bodhidharma was the fearlessness of the spiritual warrior. Different from stoicism, naïveté, or arrogance, this fearlessness is selfless, generous, and compassionate. Fearlessness is not a matter of ignoring fear, but of really acknowledging it and being empowered by it. We're confident that we can deal with whatever presents itself to us, regardless of the outcome.

In the martial arts, falling down and getting up are not two things; they are one reality. Falling down-failure-is a dimension of returning

to one's feet-success. Instead of seeing these two aspects as inseparable, most of us set them against each other, fearing them both. And so we spend our lives caught between two iron mountains: We're afraid of dying, and we're afraid of really living. How do we break free from this prison to advance without hesitation?

When we do not separate ourselves from our fear, we transcend it. Each one of us is born with this same kind of fearlessness, but we need to realize it as our own lives, the life of all buddhas, all beings.

We are living in painful times. From the point of view of the Buddha-dharma, crises are also opportunities to transform our lives. We can shy away from the difficulties, hoping that if we ignore them long enough, they will fade into the cobwebs of our mind. Or we can convince ourselves that we are dealing with them in our practice, while simply suppressing them. Until we honestly go through the process of working with our feelings as they arise, they will just fester within us, waiting to resurface.

We can choose to get lost in our personal terror, but the fact remains that we are the only ones who can heal fear, anger, and pain by the way we use our minds. The ten thousand things, all the barriers, all the peace and the joy of this world, are nothing but the self. The question is, how do we understand it? Now more than ever we need to trust ourselves and let the years we have put into our practice come alive.

John Daido Loori Roshi (1931–2009) was the spiritual leader and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.